

THE FEASTS OF MARY

The various celebrations of Mary are scattered throughout the year. Because these feast days do not occur within the calendar in the same order that the events actually happened in Mary's life, their relationship to the story of Jesus and Mary can sometimes be lost. When we read them in the "living" order in which they happened, we can more easily appreciate Mary's faith journey as well as the relationship of these feasts to Jesus' life.

As Vatican II reminded us, we honor Mary when we celebrate the cycle of Christ's saving mysteries. "Mary is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son" (Constitution on Sacred Liturgy 107). The accompanying chart places Marian celebrations in calendar order. Their relative importance is also shown by the rankings—from highest to lowest—of Solemnity, Feast, and Memorial. This is best measured by their closeness to the saving events of Jesus' life.

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The Immaculate Conception: December 8

Although Joachim and Anne are not named in the Bible, an ancient tradition holds that they were Mary's parents. Their feast is on July 26. We believe that Mary was conceived by her parents in the natural human way, but that she was conceived without original sin. This is a gift God gave her in anticipation of her Son's redemption. When Pope Pius IX defined this belief in 1854, he explained that God's grace was given to her "in such a wonderful manner that she would always be free from every stain of sin". Mary is revered as patroness of the United States under this title. The national shrine of the Immaculate Conception is located in Washington, DC.

The Birth of Mary" September 8

Although we do not know the date of Mary's birth, Christians have celebrated it on this day since the seventh century. The date of the feast of the Immaculate Conception was determined by counting back nine months from this date, the time from conception to birth. Mary's birthday is one of only three celebrated in the Christian calendar. Along with the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, it celebrates the dawn of salvation.

The Presentation of Mary in the Temple: November 21

Once again, we have no biblical record of this event, but like all Jewish children, Mary would have been brought to the Temple on the 40th day after her birth.

The Annunciation: March 25

All of the most important feasts of Mary are really celebrations of Jesus. That is why the name of this feast was changed from the Annunciation of Mary to the Annunciation of Our Lord. It is the celebration of Jesus' conception by the Virgin Mary, accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel for this feast, Luke 1:26-38, is the first time Mary appears in the Bible. The angel Gabriel greets her with the words that have become the first part of the Hail Mary. Mary is deeply disturbed and fearful. Yet she places her trust in God, saying, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

The feast of Jesus' conception occurs exactly nine months before the celebration of his birth. When March 25 falls during Holy Week, the Annunciation is celebrated after Easter.

The Visitation: May 31

Luke's account of the Annunciation is immediately followed by his story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, who despite her advanced age was soon to be the mother of John the Baptist. This date is after the Annunciation but before the celebration of John's birth on June 24 so that the order of these days in our liturgy follows the actual order of the events.

Elizabeth greets Mary with the words that are the second part of the Hail Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". In response, Mary offers a prayer which is known today as the Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord..." The name of the prayer comes from the Latin word "Magnificat", which is the first word of the prayer. It is sometimes translated, "My soul magnifies the Lord".

The Birth of Jesus: December 25

Advent presents Mary, along with Isaiah and John the Baptist, as models for our preparation for the coming of Jesus. The Gospel for the fourth Sunday of Advent particularly focuses on Mary's role in God's plan of salvation. While the celebration of Christmas naturally focuses on Jesus, we reflect also on Mary's part in giving him life and upon her vital link to the whole mystery of the Incarnation.

The Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God: January 1

This is the oldest and most important feast of Mary. Coming one week after Christmas, it is a second celebration of Jesus' birth with a special focus on Mary as the Mother of God.

The title "Mother of God" was given to Mary at the Council of Ephesus in 431. IN the early Church some claimed that Mary should only be called the mother of the human Jesus and not the mother of God. The council taught, however, that the humanity and divinity of Jesus could not be separated and that they exist in the one person—with the momentous implication that we can rightly give Mary the title of Mother of God. Again we see that a celebration of Mary is a celebration of her Son.

The Presentation of the Lord: February 2

The feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple was previously called the Purification of Mary, but its name was changed to place the focus more clearly on Jesus. Yet because of Mary's role in these events, it is still a way to reflect on her. In the Gospel we hear the prophecy of Simeon spoken to her: "You yourself shall be pierced with a sword—so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare". Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter, "Mother of the Redeemer", reflected on the meaning of these words: "Simeon's words seem like a second Annunciation to Mary, for he tells her the actual historical situation in which the Son is to accomplish his mission, namely, in misunderstanding and sorrow. This announcement...reveals to her that she will have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Savior, and that her motherhood will be mysterious and sorrowful".

Mary in the Life of Jesus

While there are no specific celebrations of Mary to highlight her role in Jesus' life after his birth, we do encounter her at various times throughout the Church's year. On the feast of the Holy Family we hear the Gospel account of Mary and Joseph finding Jesus in the Temple. On the Second Sunday of the Year we see her with Jesus at the wedding feast of Cana, urging him to do something to help the couple whose wine has run out. On Passion Sunday and Good Friday we find Mary at the foot of the cross, fulfilling the prophecy that Simeon spoke when Jesus was just an infant. And on Pentecost Luke reminds us that Mary was with the apostles in the upper room when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

The Assumption: August 15

We do not know anything about Mary's life after the day of Pentecost. Christian tradition holds that Mary spent the last years of her life in Ephesus (Turkey) with the apostle John. There is also a church in Jerusalem called the Church of the Dormition ("falling asleep") at the legendary place of her death. In some parts of the Church there was once a commemoration of her death.

Since the seventh century this celebration has been called the Assumption. IN 1950 Pope Pius XII defined as a dogma of our faith that Mary was assumed into heaven "body and soul", without specifying whether or not Mary actually experienced physical death.

Although this question has been debated for centuries, the stronger tradition seems to be that Mary underwent actual death—like Jesus and all other Christians—before she was assumed into heaven. Whatever the details of her passing, she enjoys now the fullness of salvation that we will all share at the resurrection of the dead. She shared in the fullness of Jesus' redemption from the moment of her conception to the completion of her earthly pilgrimage.

Six Marian Celebrations of Special Interest

In addition to the celebrations of Mary's life, there are six other celebrations of her in the liturgical calendar for the United States. Although there are many other titles by which we venerate Mary, we focus here only on those which we celebrate in the liturgy.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary: Date varies

This feast was extended to the universal Church by Pius XII in 1944. IN our times, the celebration of this day varies according to the date of Easter. It usually takes place in June on the Saturday after the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The hearts of Jesus and Mary are often depicted together as an expression of their union in love and their love for us. This day reminds us of Mary's sinlessness, of the prayerful way she pondered the mystery of Jesus in her heart and of her unceasing love for us.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel: July 16

Mt. Carmel is located on the coast of Israel just north of the city of Haifa. Tradition holds that it was the place where the prophet Elijah confronted the pagan prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19-46). It is an ancient shrine of Mary and it was here that the Order of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel was founded about 1154. This contemplative Order, known as the Carmelites, began to celebrate its patronal feast on July 16 because, according to its tradition, it was on this day in 1251 that Mary appeared to the Carmelite St. Simon Stock in England and gave him the brown scapular as a sign of her love and protection. Our lady of Mt. Carmel is especially revered in Italy and by Italian-Americans.

Dedication of St. Mary Major: August 5

The Basilica of St. Mary Major is located in Rome on one of the seven hills of the city. It is one of the most ancient churches in Rome and the first among the churches dedicated to our Lady. On this day we celebrate Mary as Mother and Model of the Church.

The Queenship of Mary: August 22

Following the establishment of the feast of Christ the King, Pope Pius XII created this feast in 1954 on May 31. The new calendar moved it to August 22 to emphasize its connection with the Assumption. We venerate Mary as queen for two reasons: because of her unique part in redemption and because she is first among the saints. Pius XII said of her: "Like her Son before her, she conquered death and was raised body and soul into heaven, where as queen, she sits in splendor at the right hand of her Son".

Our Lady of Sorrows: September 15

One aspect of Mary's life that is being appreciated anew today is her suffering. The poor, especially in Africa, find in her one who walks with them: as a refugee, as a mother whose son is unjustly murdered, as a widow. The Gospels give us ample record of the sufferings Mary endured. The circumstances of Jesus' birth were harsh, even by the standards of the day. Afterward the Holy Family fled to Egypt to escape persecution by Herod. The loss of Jesus in the Temple signaled the new challenge of understanding his ministry. Ultimately, his passion and death were her greatest trial.

Our Lady of the Rosary: October 7

The origins of this feast lie in the 16th century when the Christian armies of Europe won a number of victories over the Muslim Turks. While the battles raged, the people of Rome prayed the rosary. In thanksgiving for the victory of the Christian navies at Lepanto, October 7, 1571, the day was dedicated to Our Lady of Victory. The name was soon changed to Our Lady of the Rosary. Catholics today do not celebrate this victory, but rather give thanks for the gift of the rosary. Because of this feast, the month of October has been dedicated to the rosary.

Two Feasts Linked with Apparitions

Two more days exist in our calendar of Marian celebrations: Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Guadalupe. These commemorate only two of the many reported apparitions of Mary to be found in the Liturgical calendar.

There are many other apparitions that enjoy the Church's approval, but they are celebrated, for the most part, only in those areas of the world where they occurred.

The remembrance of an apparition during the liturgical year is an expression of the Church's recognition of its validity and that the message received from the Virgin is in harmony with Catholic belief. The Church stops short, however, of insisting that the apparition be accepted as part of the faith that all must accept.

Our Lady of Lourdes: February 11

On this date in 1858, the Blessed Mother appeared to a 14 year old girl named Bernadette Soubirous. This was the first of 18 apparitions. When Bernadette was pressed by the local abbot to learn the name of the woman who was appearing to her, Mary identified herself as "the Immaculate Conception". Since the dogma had only recently been proclaimed and was unknown to Bernadette, the message was convincing. The apparitions were given the Church's approval in 1862. In the years that followed many came to this small French town in the Pyrenees and were healed in the water flowing from a spring that welled up in the grotto where the apparitions took place. The pilgrimages and the healing continue today.

Our Lady of Guadalupe: December 12

In December of 1531 Our Lady appeared to an Aztec farmer named Juan Diego near a native Aztec shrine in Tepeyac, near present day Mexico City. She told Juan to go to the bishop and ask that a church be built in that place. When the bishop demanded a sign, Mary instructed Juan to take with him the roses that were blooming there, even though it was December, winter time. Returning to the bishop's house, Juan removed his coarse cloak and found that the image of Our Lady was emblazoned upon it. The cloak with its image is still viewed today inside the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe by pilgrims from around the world. Our Lady of Guadalupe, who was declared "Patroness of the Americas" by Pope Pius XII in 1954, is widely revered throughout the Americas and receives special affection from Native American and Hispanic communities. The importance of this feast concerning cultural diversity in the Church can not be emphasized enough.

Devotion to Mary

The People of God through the ages have shown Mary veneration and love. They have called upon her in prayer and they imitate her. All these ways of praising Mary draw us closer to Christ. When Mary is honored, her Son is duly acknowledged, loved and glorified, and his commandments are observed. To venerate Mary correctly means to acknowledge her Son, for she is the Mother of God. To love her means to love Jesus, for she is always the Mother of Jesus.

To pray to Our Lady means not to substitute her for Christ, but to glorify her Son who desires us to have loving confidence in his saints, especially in his Mother.